Hermes Leads the Way

Part 2 of the Series: Alchemy and the Imagination

[This article (part of a 7 part series) is based upon the draft of a talk delivered to the Bendigo Writers' Council and general public in August 2008 by Dr Ian Irvine entitled 'Alchemy and the Imagination']

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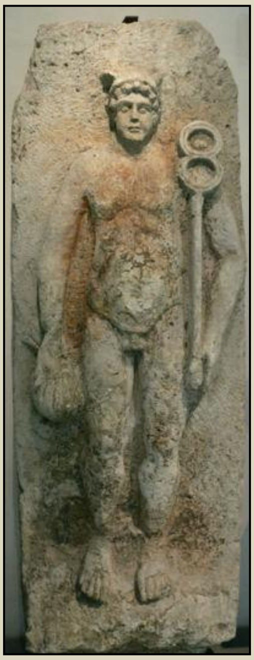
Publisher: Mercurius Press, Australia, 2010-13.

Hermes Leads the Way

Having briefly outlined the alchemical foundations to the late Medieval creativity/scholarly archetype of 'Hermes Trismejistus' in Part 1 of this series it is now time to attempt a brief 'archaeology' of the figure of Hermes over the past 3,500 years.

Archaic Feature of Hermes—the Cardinal Hermetic Qualities



Both Hermes and Thoth, in their respective traditions, were inventors of writing and protectors of scribes. They were also divine guardians of esoteric knowledge of all descriptions and, as a consequence, archetypal teachers. It is, however, in the figure of Hermes/Mercury that the impulses of the 'psychologist/shaman' fuse most seamlessly with the impulses of the 'writer/poet'. This ancient fusion, goes back, at the very least, to Classical descriptions of Hermes.

Those exhibiting the Hermetic disposition (unlike the Orphic or Dionysian dispositions) can be both healers of imbalances within and between souls and masters of story-telling, poetry and the like. Both faculties can coexist and enrich each other. Jung himself is evidence of this grand and ancient fusion, with his long commitment to both psychology and alchemy, and his life-long interest in art and literature. These days he is certainly known as one of the most creative of psychologists; i.e. one of the most in-tune with the creative imagination. Similarly, a figure such as the German poet Goethe can be seen as the most alchemical, and in modern terms 'psychological', of poets![1]

Karl Kerenyi writes eloquently on the complexity of the classical Hermes figure in his book *Hermes: Guide of Souls*. The tradition he uncovers is rich indeed, and this is so despite his leaving to one side the late-Classical Hermetic and Medieval alchemical literature concerning the figures of 'Hermes Trismejistus' and 'Mercurious'. To Kerenyi the Greek God Hermes is a fascinating but elusive deity since his *modus operandi* is saturated with qualities these days associated with what Jung called the 'trickster archetype'. As God of thieves and trickery (though usually in the ultimate best interests of a community or individual) he possesses a charming though self-effacing personality as well as an unnerving capacity to move about as though invisible. He is also the God of travelers and is known as the 'messenger god' or divine 'herald'. Hermes is also a figure presiding over sudden abrupt change and over movement between worlds, specifically between Olympus, the mortal world and Hades. This capacity for psycho-spiritual (and metaphoric) 'flight' is famously symbolized by his winged sandals and winged traveler's hat. This ancient association with thresholds and transitions also landed him the job of divine psychopomp, or leader of recently departed souls as they journeyed to Hades. In the Greek tradition death thus meant an inevitable encounter with Hermes (and his 'caduceus' or wand of serpents).

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[1] Baigent and Leigh (1997, Chapt 13) provide a fascinating rollcall of Romantic, Realist, Modernist and even Postmodernist writers either directly (e.g. Goethe, Coleridge, Blake, Flaubert, Yeats, Baudelaire, Joyce, Thomas Mann, Rilke, Patrick White, etc.) or more discretely (Byron, Shelley, Huysmans, Mallarme, Wilde, Eliot, Virginia Woolfe, Kafka, Hesse, Musil, Borges, Thomas Pynchon, Marquez, etc.) influenced by alchemical/hermetic traditions.

He was also the god of good cheer, communality, fulfilled male domesticity, wealth and successful trade. In these senses he was often depicted as a friendly fellow, almost like a close male friend. This is how he manifests in Homer's *Odyssey* where he helps Odysseus ward off the seductions of the Goddess Circe by gifting him a magic potion.

The 'caduceus', or wand of entwined snakes (some say representing illness and recuperation), that Hermes is often depicted carrying, was also associated with Asclepius, the Greek healer God. Its origins as a symbol perhaps date to the ancient Mesopotamian civilizations of the Near-East. It has been argued that as archetypal 'magician', and as a key figure in many classical (and later) mystery traditions, Hermes presided over psycho-spiritual healing whereas Asclepius was more of a physician in our sense, i.e. presiding over bodily ailments. We must remember, however, that much ancient psychiatry had strong magical and mythopoetic sub-currents and that in the ancient world many physical ailments were interpreted along spiritual lines. It is this element to Hermes, mediated later through the alchemical figure 'Mercurious', that Jung instinctively picked up on in his attempts to ground 'Archetypal Psychology' in ancient psycho-spiritual traditions.

Four aspects of the classical Hermes are worth re-emphasizing with regard to their importance to modern writers and artists: 1) his association with the invention of writing and thus his close association with the craft of writing and thus with writers; 2) his association with music (interestingly it is a particularly embodied, sexual and 'shameless' kind of music that he creates[2]) via the magical tortoise shell he purportedly gave, in the form of a lyre, to Apollo ['Hermes was the first/ to manufacture songs/ from the turtle he encountered …'][3] ; 3) his profound association with esoteric knowledge and magic of all descriptions; and 4) his association with three bee, or fate, goddesses, who 'prophesied' (sang like muses) when drunk on honey. Nor Hall, in discussing their relationship to creativity, writes: 'These three fabled sisters whose ancient heads come up withered from pollen-filled flowers, are responsible for both poetic inspiration and madness'. In further discussing the 'Thriae', Hall informs us:

> One represents madness, another clarity, and the third the brink, the place or phenomena of reversal … things turn into their opposites. [4]

Hekate—with whom Hermes had many things in common—was said to have given similar gifts to the young Hermes. Like the Bee-Goddesses, he is often depicted as three-headed. The associations between poetic madness (for good or ill), the three female fates, and Hermes as 'ruler of dreams' (*hegetor oneiron*) has been noted by modern scholars of the imagination, as well as by depth psychologists.

From *Hermes Trismejistus* to the Mercury of Alchemy

There are many differences between the classical Hermes (who was perceived as a God) and the mysterious, though more or less human, figure of Hermes Trismegistus, legendary founder of Hermetic philosophy and the traditional author of the 'Emerald Tablet'—a key text in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Many sections of the *Corpus* are believed to date back to at least the first century CE, perhaps earlier, though in Medieval times, they were believed to be older still, going back to Egyptian sources that preceded the

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2 See the *Hymn to Hermes.*

3 From the *Hymn to Hermes*, as translated and discussed in Kerenyi, 2003.

4 Hall, Nor. p.215.

Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Apart from the deity/human divide, the other obvious difference between the two figures is that the Hermes Trismejistus of the *Corpus* comes across as an early adherent of a kind of pagan monotheism[5]—indeed Burckhardt notes that the Hermes of the *Corpus* believes in the 'the transcendent principle of the intellect'[6] At times this Hermes 'thrice great' appeared to initiates as absurd, at other times he seemed sublime. Hermes as deity, however, is by definition an invention of the polytheistic Greek mind. A blurring of the lines was inevitable, and thus no matter how much the Church fathers of the Medieval period attempted to see the Hermetic writings (like the writings of Plato), and Hermes Trismejistus, as 'pre-Christian seeds of the Logos'[7] the earlier figure of Hermes/Mercury was ever in danger of ruining such cosy theological accommodations—as is evidenced by the Medieval fondness for many artists blurring the lines, pictorially speaking, between Hermes as polytheistic god and Hermes Trismejistus. This tendency is particularly evident, as we would expect, in the alchemical imagery and texts of the Renaissance and Early Modern periods—i.e. periods when church hegemony was threatened, in the fist instance by Humanism and in the second by Science.

This tension in the Hermetic and alchemical literature between monotheistic, or at least monist, tendencies (though according to Walter Scott the books of the *Corpu*s in no sense outline a Judo-Christian monotheism) and polytheistic tendencies shadows the entire Western Hermetic-Alchemical tradition, right through even to the twentieth century. Indeed, one can sense such tensions in Jung's Archetypal Psychology given many of his theoretical constructs are in dialogue with Renaissance and Early Modern alchemical texts. Some scholars see Jung's theories as a modern day recapitulation of polytheistic, even animistic, cosmologies, and there is clearly some truth in such arguments.

Hermes, however, as master of shape-shifting, also adopted other forms during the pre-modern period. The 'Mercurius' of Medieval alchemy is not quite Hermes Trismejistus, nor is he Hermes, or even Mercury, the deity. Rather, as he appears in later alchemical texts and folk-lore, he is best understood as a kind of 'spirit presiding over all kinds of transformations/transmutations. In terms of Medieval alchemy he (though in many respects s/he might be a better designation given his gender shape-shifting abilities and associations with the original hermaphroditic creation) is said to be the beginning, the middle and the end of the 'Great Work' – in short an arch-daimon in whom the dualisms and contradictions of everyday existence were somehow resolved. Some alchemists also saw Mercurius as a personification of the Imagination.

There is no doubt that elements of Hermetic philosophy were central to alchemy

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[5] This is most obviously confirmed by the Hermetic creation myth outlined in 'Libellvs 1' of the *Corpus* (trans. in Walter Scott, *Hermetica*, p.117-125]—it is a very long way from the foundation polytheistic Greek creation myths we find in Homer, Hesiod, etc. In the Hermetic myth God, the 'Original Mind', is described as bisexual and gives birth to a second mind, a 'Maker of things' who in turn creates 'Seven Administrators' i.e. the Seven Planets, who of course at that time were associated with the classical Gods. Another female figure, Nature, who is described as 'bereft of reason', also figures prominently in the Creation process in that she falls in love with a creation of the Original Mind, i.e. man, and in a standard patriarchal trope, 'man' is seduced by, in this case, 'Nature void of reason' such that he becomes tangled in 'matter', ever-after a tragic dual being, partly of the immortal realm, partly of the realm of matter. Interestingly, however, the figure of Nature also creates 'Seven [bisexual humans] according to the characters of the [Seven Planets]' Immediately after their creation, however, these creatures are split apart into male and female by the Original Mind's will—in short a second fall, the first being the seduction of man by Nature.

[6] Burckhardt, T. *Alchemy*, p.37.

[7] Ibid, p.37.

(the figure of the hermaphrodite for example), but the alchemical obsession with the elements, the planets, and of course the physical processes involved in transforming the *prima materia*, base metals and so on, grounded alchemical activities in 'Nature' to such a degree that the more transcendental aspects of Hermetic philosophy were often subsumed under a philosophy of immanence, that eventually helped birth scientific materialism.

The Hermesian Principle

> 'It is generally agreed that Odin in Norse mythology corresponds to Lug among the Celts, Hermes (Mercurius to the Romans) among the Greeks, and Varuna in Vedic India. The archetypal figure personified in these parallel myths is the divine inspirer, through poetry and prophecy, of those arts which permit man momentarily to approximate himself once more to divinity.'[8]

Nikolai Tolstoy's comments indicate that the figure of Hermes has counterparts in many other traditions. Indeed as a manifestation of the shaman and trickster archetypes he may well have an ancient world-wide lineage of relevance to many peoples on many continents. Tolstoy, of course, wanted to plot similarities between roles shared by Hermes and Pan and the Celtic-Arthurian figures Merlin and Lug. For my part I'd also like to add to the Celtic mix the Welsh bardic figure of Taliesin whose associations with the Goddess Cerridwen's alchemical 'Cauldron of Poetry' is well documented.

Like Tolstoy, H. R. Ellis Davidson in *Myths and Symbols of Pagan Europe* links Mercury/Hermes to Odin and Lug/Lleu 'the Shining One'- but also discusses the German God, Wodan, as a related figure.[9] Norman O. Brown, in his study of Hermes, discusses similarities between Hermes/Mercury and Loki (among the northern Europeans), Marduk and Ea (among the ancient Babylonians), Coyote (among the North American Indians) and Brhaspati (among the Hindus). Interestingly, Brer Rabbit, a character from folk-lore, is also discussed.[10] Antoine Faivre following a more traditional line discusses links between Hermes/Mercury and the Babylonian scribe god, Nebo (or Nabu), the Egyptian scribe and magician God, Thoth, and of course the figure of Hermes Trisemejistus as he appeared in Medieval alchemy and Hermetic traditions.[11] Garth Fowden adds the Christian archangel, Michael, to the list in his book *The Egyptian Hermes*[12] rounding off a wonderfully complex and many-faceted matrix of cross-cultural - what I'll term 'Hermesian' - associations.

Mircea Eliade, in discussing deities associated with alchemy in Indian traditions, outlines historic associations between the metal 'mercury' and the deity Shiva, stating, "In the *Kubjika Tantra*, Shiva speaks of mercury as his generating principle and lauds its efficiency when it has been 'fixed' (i.e. dead) six times. […] Side by side with the chemical significance of the 'fixation' (or 'death') of mercury,

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[8] Nikolai Tolstoy, *The Quest for Merlin*, p.270, 1988 (1985).

[9] H.R. Davidson, p.90, 1988.

[10] In Norman O. Brown, *Hermes the Thief: The Evolution of a Myth*, 1990.

[11] In Antoine Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes: From Greek God to Alchemical Magus*, 1995.

[12] Garth Fowden, 1993 (1986).

there is a purely alchemical (yogi-tantric) meaning …”[13]

Some texts even describe mercury as ‘the semen of Shiva’. Eliade uncovers fascinating links between Shiva, yoga postures involving control over breathing and Indian alchemy (suggesting in the process that we perhaps see the body as a kind of divine forge or alembic) which have fascinating parallels in Medieval Celtic ‘cauldron lore’ concerned as it was with psycho-spiritual indicators for measuring the progress of professional bards. Also relevant are Eliade’s discussions of an ancient relationship between Chinese alchemy and Taoism.

Such intricate associations, vast as they appear, are, I would suggest, only the tip of the ice-berg, since most of these authors limit their discussions (of what we are here terming the ‘Hermesian Principle’) to manifestations occurring in polytheistic or at latest Western Mystical and Occult traditions. Not surprisingly then, the deities (or legendary figures) sharing divine attributes commensurate with those possessed by the Classical ‘Hermes’ are inevitably contextualised in terms of what we might call primitive or pre-scientific alchemy in either its ‘spiritual‘ or ‘practical’ forms.[14] The figure of Faust, surely the most radical historical transmutation of the ‘magician’ archetype, tends to act as the Early Modern end point for what we might call the sacred ‘Hermesian’ tradition. After him the alchemist figure becomes either a scientist completely free of Hermesian elements or an occultist and never the two shall meet. The real story of Hermes in the modern world, however, is not so easily summarised.

If we adopt, even in a general way, Jung’s notion of ‘archetypes’ we quickly become aware of the many ways in which the Old Gods manifest in modern, apparently secular, forms e.g. If Hermes is a God of language and writing, it might be instructive to look at changes and transmutations occurring in such spheres of modern culture for signs of his well-concealed influence. At another level of observation we may acknowledge, as Jung did - similarly, Gaston Bachelard - that ancient alchemical principles are discernable behind a range of modern cultural, psychological, and socio-political phenomena. In short, I want to suggest that we can pin-point and discuss specific modern manifestations of the ‘Hermesian principle’ (with associated elemental and alchemical aspects) as a means to better understood the continuities that exist between archaic cosmologies and modern ideologies and cultural phenomena. Articles Three and Four of this series attempt the beginnings of such an exploration.

Summary (Parts 1 & 2): Alchemy, Hermes and Creativity

It is worth pausing for a moment to summarise the link between the figure of Hermes and the ancient art/science of alchemy introduced in Part 1 of this series. We can say that there were clear tensions between the pagan polytheistic figure of Hermes and the more transcendental Hermes of the Hermetic literature and Medieval alchemy. At times the alchemical Hermes takes on Christianity derived infernal aspects entirely unknown to the classical Hermes. This is especially evident, as Jung documents, in his role as Mercurius, the trickster spirit, associated with the early stages of the ‘work’ i.e. in particular the nigredo stage.[15] Despite this fact there nevertheless seem

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[13] Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy*, p.133. 1971 (1956).

[14] See Rodney Blackhirst‘s fascinating work entitled, *Primordial Alchemy*, 2008.

[15] See Jung’s discussion, in ‘The Spirit Mercurius’ in *Alchemical Studies* (pp.193-250), of the

to be many continuities suggesting that elements of the primitive pagan alchemy of the Greeks and Egyptians (and possibly Hindu Indians and the Babylonians) was imported to some extent into Medieval alchemy.

In his work on Mercurius and Hermes Jung summarises the contribution of this figure to 'the work' undertaken by spiritual alchemists. Hermes was believed to be able to move between various worlds and states of being/manifestation, he could also dissolve psychic and spiritual impasses and impurities. For our purposes Jung read the alchemical quest in terms of a psycho-spiritual journey aimed at confronting (not putting off or transcending)—through personal alchemical transmutations—the more destructive, inferior aspects of the individual's psychic inheritance (i.e. to Jung there is a confrontation with 'the Shadow' which in alchemy was symbolized by 'mortification'—a sub-stage of the *Nigredo*).[16] This commitment to a spirituality of immanence, to attaining the fullest possible manifestation of being in a particular lived existence, is arguably at the centre of medieval spiritual Alchemy.

Part Three of this series will look more specifically at the influence on Jung of both Alchemy and Hermetic and Gnostic thinking in the development of his idea of 'Active Imagination' a unique way of looking at and approaching creativity of use to almost any creative artist today.

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'devilish' aspects to Hermes/Mercurius in some late Medieval and Early Modern alchemical texts.

[16] Known elsewhere, for example in Christian mysticism, as the *via negativa.*

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